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INFO RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7021
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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3155
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 8781
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1769
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3623
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1261
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
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UNCLAS COLOMBO 000653

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS TO USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA
AID/W FOR DCHA/FFP FOR JDWORKEN, JBORNS
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA FOR ACONVERY, RTHAYER AND RKERR
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA WBERGER
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA MROGERS AND POL SBERRY
USMISSION GENEVA FOR NKYLOH
USUN FOR ECOSOC DMERCADO

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ICRC UPDATE: REGISTRATION OF EX-COMBATANTS
COMPLETED, PROTECTION WORK CONSTRAINED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Charge attended an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) briefing by Head of Delegation Paul Castella on June 25 to update heads of Mission on the status of ICRC's humanitarian activities, as well as on its efforts to register ex-combatants detained by the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL). ICRC stated that it had completed the registration of surrendeers and had registered 9,186 detainees who are being held in 11 disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation (DDR) camps, most of which are located in Vavuniya District. ICRC stated that they have been able to provide information to more than 2,500 families on the status of the detainees registered. ICRC commented that the GSL was unprepared to handle the influx of surrendeers and therefore had not allocated funds to provide support to the camps. ICRC said that the committee has five international staff in the entire Sri Lankan Delegation who speak Tamil or Singhalese and who are available to visit the camps to carry out the registrations. Castella concluded the briefing by stating that the GSL is currently reviewing the status of the ICRC and that diplomatic intervention on its behalf could be counter-productive. He encouraged the heads of missions, however, to continue to advocate collectively and individually for protection of the rights of detainees, as well as of all civilians displaced during the conflict. In keeping with ICRC's mandate, Castella asked briefing attendees to protect the information and figures he provided and not attribute them to ICRC. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Charge attended an ICRC briefing hosted by Head of Delegation Paul Castella on June 25 to update heads of mission on the status of ICRC's humanitarian activities, as well as on efforts to register ex-combatants detained by the GSL. Castella stated that ICRC continues to focus on IDPs in northern Sri Lanka and is providing food, relief commodities, healthcare, and engineering/construction support to help rebuild health facilities for those wounded in the conflict. ICRC reported poor access to Manik Farm by ICRC staff conducting non-assistance protection and monitoring activities.

OVER 9000 SURRENDEES AND NEARLY 1000 ARRESTED

¶3. (SBU) ICRC stated that it had completed registration of

surrendeeds and had registered 9,186 individuals who are being held in 11 DDR centers, most of which are located in Vavuniya. 173 minors have been separated from adult detainees and are located in one DDR facility. Females are located in a separate facility and the remaining adult males in nine others. The current population of each of these centers ranges from 600 to 1,900 people. ICRC stated that the GSL plans to open an additional 11 centers, bringing the total to 22 with a target capacity of 400 people each. Castella stated that conditions in the rehabilitation centers are comparable to conditions in Manik Farm and that "there was nothing much to worry about."

14. (SBU) Castella reported that in addition to the 9000-plus surrendeeds, since January 1, 2009, 930 ex-combatants and other alleged LTTE supporters have been arrested under Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act. ICRC has access to these detainees, who are located in several facilities around the country, including in Colombo. ICRC reported no problems with access to these persons, including the arrested Ministry of Health doctors who were working in the no-fire zone. ICRC said that the next step is to take the registration data and compare it to a list that ICRC has compiled of individuals who have been reported as missing. ICRC noted that it was too early to arrive at any conclusions on possible discrepancies between the number of detainees registered and the number reported missing since neither ICRC nor the GSL have reliable figures on missing persons.

FAMILY NOTIFICATIONS

15. (SBU) ICRC stated that ICRC staff have been able to provide information to more than 2,500 families on the status of the detainees registered. The ICRC Vavuniya sub-delegation is handling

approximately 50 notifications a day, whereas 350 families in Manik Farm have been provided information on missing family members. ICRC reported that in some cases family members are able to visit arrested persons and that ICRC has assisted family members who live in northern areas of the country to obtain the necessary authorizations to cross the Mediwachiya checkpoint to visit arrestees, who are mostly detained in the south.

ASSISTANCE TO DDR FACILITIES

16. (SBU) ICRC commented that the GSL was unprepared to handle the influx of surrendeeds and had not allocated funds to provide support to the center. Local non-governmental organizations and religious organizations have been providing food and ICRC has distributed 4,673 hygiene and clothing kits to the detainees. ICRC is currently conducting a needs assessment to determine additional requirements and gaps in assistance.

CONSTRAINTS ON PROTECTION ACTIVITIES

17. (SBU) ICRC said that the committee only has five international staff in the entire Sri Lankan Delegation who speak Tamil or Sinhalese and who are able to visit the centers to carry out registrations. With registration completed, ICRC plans to return to the DDR centers to conduct follow-up protection work. Staff shortages, however, attributable in part to visa problems, have prevented them from doing so. ICRC indicated that they had not received any approvals for visas submitted for new international staff and/or to extend current staff in the last month. This hinders operations as ICRC has had to shift resources within the Delegation to cover the shortages. Castella reported that access to conduct registration was adequate but he did not know how it would be for follow-up protection activities. Withholding visas, though, is seen as a symptom of a bigger issue. The GSL reportedly believes that now that the conflict is over, there is less for ICRC to do and thus it needs fewer staff in country.

CHALLENGING OPERATING ENVIRONMENT FOR ICRC

18. (SBU) Castella commented that ICRC has limited dialogue with the senior decision-makers who can affect change. If ICRC's ability to carry out its mandate in Sri Lanka is limited by GSL actions that restrict the level of expatriate staff, it would deprive the international community of a neutral, independent, humanitarian

action organization that can work to enhance the protection of rights of persons denied their liberty. He concluded the briefing by stating that the GSL is currently reviewing the status of the ICRC and that he does not want to raise his voice too loudly. He encouraged the heads of missions continue to advocate collectively and individually for protection of the rights of detainees, as well as of all those displaced during the conflict, but indicated that it could be counterproductive for foreign missions to press the GSL on ICRC access and visas, saying this could be "like throwing oil on the fire."

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Clearly Castella's remarks were calibrated to a larger diplomatic audience. Post has advocated with the GSL in the past on behalf of ICRC regarding visa issues, and we will consult privately with ICRC officials in Colombo to determine if they would want us to do so once again. In a private meeting earlier this week with an ICRC protection officer, PolOff was told the visa problem will become especially acute this summer, as a comparatively large number of international staff will be required to leave, and no new staff will replace them unless visas are obtained.

MOORE